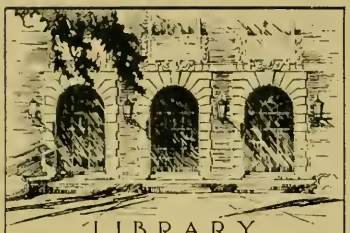


LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

WHAT IS THE SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF OUR METROPOLIS? AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY, AT ST. MARY'S CHURCH IN OXFORD,

ON

THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY, 1860.

BY

ROBERT GREGORY, M.A.

OF CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE, AND PERPETUAL CURATE OF ST. MARY-THE-LESS, LAMBETH.

Oxford and London:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

1860.

LONDON:
Printed by G. Barclay, Castle St. Leicester Sq.

A SERMON,

&c.

Isa. lx. 2.

For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee.

The prophecies of Isaiah seem to indicate very plainly, that the manifestation of Christ's presence was to be permanent and perpetual under that better dispensation which His advent in the flesh was to usher in. It was not to be confined to that half-seen, half-hidden display of His glory, which we this day commemorate, or to those general exhibitions of His power and holiness which were placed before the men of Judea, His contemporaries, or to those brighter and clearer manifestations which were vouchsafed to His personal followers; but rather the prophet's words would seem to indicate that, like the advancing tide, the influences of His presence should flow on, till the whole world was covered; that, like the dawning of the day, they should spread, till the remotest corners were illumined. For we read, "Behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee:" and then the effect of this was to be, "the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising;" and this extension of blessings from the new dispensation was to proceed with ap-

parently increasing force, until "violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise . . . Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended. Thy people also shall be all righteous."*

The manner in which the high anticipations raised by these sure words of prophecy shall be fulfilled, is more than any can fully comprehend. Our Lord's manifestation in the days of His flesh was a disappointment to nearly the whole of those by whom He was seen. It did not realise what they expected. It was not at all like what they had imagined. It had none of that outward, sensible, tangible glory, of which they had dreamed. It is therefore to be anticipated, that the dispensation which He ushered in, and of which such wondrous things were equally foretold, should produce a similar feeling upon those by whom it is seen. If, when He came, "in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,"† it seemed to those by whom He was beheld that He had "no form nor comeliness," and when they saw Him, "there was no beauty that they should desire Him,"‡ it can excite no wonder or surprise that the Church, "which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all,"§ should seem "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." If, when the Sun arose in His pure and dazzling splendour, men could not discern His brightness or recognise His beauty, it is only to be expected, when this same Light has to be seen hidden by the earthiness and many frailties of those through whom it is manifested, that it should fail to be discerned, and ofttimes seem altogether quenched.

Thus much has been said to guard myself against being supposed to doubt or deny the reality of Christ's presence with His Church. In that presence I fully believe; whilst, as a true and loyal son of the Church of England, I as fully believe that in no branch of the Church Universal is it vouchsafed in a richer and a fuller measure than in our own. But whilst saying this,

* Isa. xi. 9. † Col. ii. 9. ‡ Isa. liii. 2. § Eph. i. 23.

The Rare Books & Manuscripts Library UIUC

it is impossible not to feel that the glories of that presence are hidden; that they are a matter of faith, and not of sight; and that, in the outward aspect of things, there is but little form or comeliness to attract, but little beauty to lead us to desire it; for it is but too obvious that the impurities and imperfections of the members of Christ, through whom His presence is manifested, too often hide its light and its brilliancy, instead of so veiling, whilst displaying them, as to attract others to gaze upon their beauty, and to acknowledge the Divine Source from which they originate.

It is, then, with the feeling that the Church, as the Body of Christ, should resemble her Divine Head, and that she should ever present the attractions of holiness to those who are still sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, that I would invite you to consider with me her present position in our crowded metropolis. It is under the conviction that it is her office so to manifest the glories of her crucified and risen Lord, as to be the light of the world, that men may see her good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven, that I would venture to call your attention to some imperfections by which her light amongst us is dimmed and well-nigh hidden. For the faults and the shortcomings of the Church are those of her individual members; her holiness is their holiness; what most attracts those who are "almost persuaded," or who are without, is the virtue and sanctity of those within: so that the Church's influence, and the benefits she dispenses, must depend to a great extent upon the manner in which her sons and her daughters are individually discharging their own peculiar duties. And it is only by considering how we are collectively fulfilling our allotted task that we can distinguish our failures, and be incited to improvement; it is only by ascertaining wherein we are severally hindering or marring, if so it be, the complete evangelisation of the world, that we can comprehend our individual responsibility and turn from our error, and fully do our part towards hastening that glad and happy day when "the Gentiles shall come to Thy light, and kings to the brightness of Thy rising," when "Thy people also shall be all righteous,

they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified."

The point, then, to which your attention is now especially invited is this,—What aspect does the Church of England present in those crowded haunts of men which are confessedly the most difficult to leaven with the influences of the Gospel? and where she must therefore, in a peculiar manner, be marked as manifesting or retarding the advance of the kingdom of her Lord; where she must be either dispelling some of the thick darkness which ever broods over fallen men, or is herself being hidden by the surrounding gloom. For, amid such myriads of those whom her Lord died to redeem, she seems especially bound to put forth all her strength, lest she should fail to manifest His power and glory, and so delay or frustrate the conversion of the world.

Before considering the question from within, let us inquire,—What would be the impression produced upon a complete stranger by the religious aspect of our metropolis? Which portion of our text would he regard as descriptive of our spiritual condition? Would he consider that darkness still covered it, and that gross darkness still brooded over our people? or would he be constrained to confess that the Lord had arisen upon it, and that His glory shone brightly upon them?

In answering this, I am not driven to imagine what would be a stranger's feelings; because it so happens that, within the last few weeks, I have heard from one who has passed the last seven years in the East,* the opinion of some of the more thoughtful and learned men of the countries in which he had sojourned—the opinion of men who had visited this country to see if all the wonderful things they had heard concerning it were true—of men before whose eyes, it may be, a clear manifestation of the power of the Gospel would not have been set in vain. And what was their impression of England's religion, judging it by what they saw of

* There is no intention to draw a comparison here between London and any other city, much less between Christian and Mahometan civilisation; it is merely a statement of fact, of the impression produced upon certain educated Mahometans by what they saw in our metropolis.

its influence upon men's lives, and measuring it by a Mahometan's standard? They had come to spend months in the investigation of what England was, and they left it after weeks, because they feared to remain longer in a land which seemed to them to be ever tempting God's sorest judgments by its misdeeds: their feeling was, that if there was justice in heaven, a doom similar to that by which Sodom and Gomorrah were overwhelmed must speedily be its portion, and they hasted away lest they should be involved in the overthrow. They beheld crowds of paupers in the streets, undeserving of the alms they solicited, and the wealthiest city in the world taking no effectual measures to distinguish the unfortunate from the profligate, and really to relieve the miserable want by which so many of its inhabitants are oppressed; and they contrasted this with their own land, where food is asked as a right and not as a favour by those who need it, and where such an appeal is never rejected. They beheld the streets swarming with prostitutes, and they were horrified at the sensuality and the sin which such scenes suggested. They saw in the manifold dealings of trade truth almost entirely banished, whilst falsehood had ceased to pay even the tribute of a blush to the virtue on which it trampled. And so they fled, terrified and amazed at the spectacle: instead of being attracted by the outer manifestation of England's religion, they thanked the God they worshipped, and the false prophet by whom they had been misled, that this religion was not their religion.

And was such terror on their part altogether vain and unfounded? was it foolish and absurd? did it arise simply from a difference between their own customs and those which they now encountered for the first time? We are so apt to hear the sweetly-soothing sounds of self-satisfaction at our superiority to others, that it is likely to seem all this to us; but I fear, that the more we look beneath the surface the more cause we shall find for trembling, lest after all such a notion should not be so unreal and imaginary as we would fain believe it. But here I will speak not from hearsay, but from personal observation and knowledge.

What, then, is the spiritual state of the inhabitants of our poor London parishes? They are in a condition of practical heathenism; religious observances of every kind are neglected; the form and the spirit have alike fled; there is little avowed unbelief, but nearly universal indifference; it is no question of Church or Dissent, or of religious opinions, by which we are assailed, (though differences have helped to produce the result over which we mourn,) but whether there shall be any religion or none! An immense majority of the people—certainly not less than four * out of every five, never enter any place of worship from year's end to year's end; and very few, indeed, of those who neglect public worship, I have reason to know, ever kneel down to say a prayer, or, so far as man can judge, have any real sense of awe for a higher Power. They live, like the brutes, a mere animal life; their thoughts are bounded by what has relation to this world; they rarely commit great crimes; they make no profession of unbelief: but the only creed in which

* The Census returns give the population of the parish of Lambeth as 139,325; the Church accommodation as 22,589; that of Dissent, 11,586; but this includes the wealthier districts of Kennington, Norwood, Brixton, and Stockwell. Exclude these parts of the parish, and the provision for the teaching of the people is comparatively reduced, whilst the attendance is in an inverse ratio to the wealth. The poorer the place, the fewer the people who enter any place of worship. This is illustrated by the fact, that whilst in the whole of Lambeth the provision by Church and Dissent is for 1 in 4·07 of the population, in my parish, which is unmixedly poor, the provision is for 1 in 5·82; our population being 15,187, and the church and episcopal chapel seating about 1,400, the two dissenting places of worship about 1,200. The Census returns for Lambeth give one-third of the sittings as always empty; it would be more than this in the poorer parts of the parish.

In the Rev. Dr. Hume's evidence before the Lords' Committee on Church-rates, he says, "In Southwark there are 68 per cent who attend no place of worship; in Lambeth, 60½."—*Report*, p. 135. Take into account the discrepancy between the rich and the poor parts of the parish mentioned above, and the proportion of non-attendants in the poor districts will be larger than I have stated it.

"The united Committee for providing special religious services for the working classes, especially in the eastern and southern parts of the metropolis," give as one of their reasons for opening theatres for the purpose, "the deplorable spiritual condition of the working classes in London, as shown by the estimate, that only about 2 in every 100 of the working *men* are found to attend any place of worship."—*Circular*, dated Dec. 17th, 1859, and signed by Lord Shaftesbury and others.

they really believe, and by which they act, is, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

But surely, it may be said, all this arises from ignorance—from their not knowing better—from their having never been taught? For years I hoped that such was the case, but every day's experience has helped to convince me more and more, that such a plea would be only partially true, and that it cannot absolutely be urged in their behalf. They do know something of religion—enough to be aware of its truth and of its importance; there are, comparatively, very few who have never been at some kind of school—though, in most cases, it has been for a very insufficient time; there are scarcely any who could not tell you that Christ came into the world to save sinners; very few, indeed, who do not believe in an eternal future of happiness or of misery: but they think that a few prayers upon their death-bed will effect all the conversion necessary to prepare them for God's presence. They see friends and neighbours, who lived as they are living, die without any special pain or agonies, without any sign to mark that they would be lost for ever, and it may be, as it often is, calmly, without a fear concerning their own eternal future; and this has satisfied them: it makes them speak confidently of the happiness of those who have passed away; it causes them to feel perfectly secure about their own. Shallow views about religion, popularly promulgated, have helped to eradicate all sense of duty: for they have come before the unhappy many in such a form as to have no influence upon life or conduct; the promises with which they abound have been made the most of, whilst their scanty requirements have been practically ignored.

But concerning the causes of this it is needful to say something, as those causes widen the extent of the evil over which we are called upon to mourn. Holy Scripture likens the Church to the human body, of which Christ is the Head—"from whom the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body, unto the edifying of itself in love."* This figure repre-

* Eph. iv. 16.

sents the several parts with their distinctive functions, and the general good of all resulting from each discharging its own office. Bones, or sinews, or joints, or flesh, or veins, would be useless in the human body unless joined to the other parts. And so it is in the social body: if one class of society is completely severed from the others, a very similar result ensues; that is, if we regard the social body in relation to the higher functions it is called upon to fulfil. The ruler ceases to be powerful when he has no sympathy with those he governs; the wealthy become hard and sensual when they are quite estranged from their poorer brethren; and what do the poor become when they are left to themselves? They are like children, lacking the self-restraint and self-respect which intercourse with their superiors produces —they have the ignorance and weakness of childhood, with the passions and stronger wills of riper years; and so their faults are those of overgrown, undisciplined children—they drift into thoughtless, self-indulgent ways: without intending harm or evil, they become slaves to their appetites. I am speaking, of course, of the mass — of those who have no clear, definite aims of their own—of those who do not rise above the many, either from religious convictions or from natural ability; for amongst the few with such definite aims we have to rejoice over some who realise that they are "called to be saints," and who shine like lights amid the surrounding darkness, whilst we observe others labouring assiduously for some earthly object. Watch the mass carefully, and you will see unnumbered indications of what I am advancing. Take as an example the way in which they spend the Lord's day. Generally it is wasted in aimless sloth; they rise late; it is too much trouble to dress carefully, and so they lounge through it, sitting at home or strolling out to purchase what they may require; eating the best they can procure; occasionally looking at a newspaper; perhaps drinking, for want of other occupation; now and then tempted out to walk; possibly, if they have been religiously trained when they were children, taking a Bible or some religious book into their hands for a short time. It is a mistake to imagine that it is chiefly the poorer portions of the labouring community who throng our railways and public walks on the

Sunday. It is a more intelligent and better-paid class of men who are found in such places,—young people in shops and offices, foremen and their wives, skilled artisans, and such-like. And then, after such a Sunday, there comes the week with its unceasing toil, undertaken to support life, gone through with no higher thought or care than simply to obtain necessary subsistence, sweetened by no higher aspirations, solaced by no interests apart from itself, cheered by no loving sympathy from those in a higher position, and so life becomes a perpetual round of slavish toil and sensual sloth. And then, need we wonder that class is separated from class; that there is no loving bond uniting all together; that the poor become more and more estranged from God; that they are shortsighted in their views, slothful and tricky at their work; that they entertain feelings of envy and dislike towards their employers? Whilst it must be obvious to all observant and reflective persons, that all this evil is greatly aggravated by that almost complete separation of classes which exists in the metropolis, with its consequent withdrawal of the very real, though in a measure imperceptible, influence which the presence of those in a higher station would exert. In their hearts all wish for the respect and notice of their superiors, and when the superior's eye is altogether withdrawn in indifference, men are apt to sink into carelessness and apathy, if not into more open evil. I am quite aware that such a motive as that to which I allude is of a very inferior character; but with the mixed nature of man we need the influence of such secondary motives,—we cannot altogether do without them in educating for eternity the weak and the ignorant.

But when class lives apart from class, and I grieve to say that in London this evil is daily increasing, other mischiefs follow. If the wealthier classes see anything of the homes of the poor, if they hear their sorrows and see their sufferings (as see and hear they must to some small extent at all events, if they live in the same neighbourhood), then the ever-ready hand of kindness is stretched out to relieve want or suffering, whenever it is really required; and charity, as an ever-flowing stream, gladdens the hearts that would otherwise have

been withered up. But when they live apart, then it demands some special trouble or exceptional distress to lead those who have grown habituated to the sight of constant and crushing poverty to make known the hardships and wretchedness by which they are surrounded, and which they cannot relieve. Then, thank God! in this country the cry for help never ascends in vain. It is at once responded to; a shower of assistance refreshes the parched and dried-up ground: but such showers are only occasional and capricious, whereas they ought to be continual and systematic. They spring from a natural kindliness of heart, and not from a deep and abiding sense of personal responsibility, without which all efforts must be transitory and insufficient.

But still further, there is another point where this separation of classes presses very heavily upon the poor; and it is one which seriously diminishes our hope of improvement in another generation. We often boast, and with much truth, of the great strides education has made in our own day, of its increased efficiency and its extended area. All this holds good of parishes where rich and poor live together; but it is true in a very limited sense of parishes inhabited exclusively by the poor. Such parishes, situated though they may be in the immediate vicinity of richer ones, call almost in vain for help, if there is no direct tie of property to give force to the appeal.* And in the richest city in the world cases are to be found where children† seek to the clergy in vain for instruction, where the very limited schools are filled to overflowing, so that some of those who would flee to them as to a harbour of refuge, have to be driven back upon the vicious training in the streets, because there is no place for them, and thus the efforts of the clergy are

* This is most strikingly illustrated by the different response which attends a letter in the *Times*, setting forth a case of educational or religious destitution, and one of physical want. For the latter, natural kindliness is immediately awakened, and large and liberal gifts flow in, as my parish has happily proved; for the former, no sense of personal responsibility is aroused, and the appeal is made almost in vain.

† Should any one doubt the truth of this assertion, I can state that such has been, and continues to be, the case in my own parish.

thwarted by want of the necessary machinery; and all for lack of funds, which it is impossible for clergymen, working for the most part with little or no earthly reward, to supply. And yet no man feels responsible for this; the property is not theirs, or the people are not directly employed by them, or there are calls elsewhere. And so it comes to pass that these poor unfortunates cry for help and no man regardeth; they are left to perish because no man feels it his business or his duty to provide for their welfare, and souls are lost for ever because a grudging spirit passed them by, unmoved by their sorrows and their dangers.

I might appeal, in support of what I have advanced, to the records of the many plans which have been set on foot for the evangelisation of our London poor. For, so far as I can gather, these records show that in every case success has attended such efforts in proportion to the sympathy and love exhibited. Men and women of large hearts and strong affections have thrown themselves amongst their poorer brethren, and they have been warmly welcomed, their ministrations have been thankfully received, and, I hope, have been instrumental in producing deep and lasting impressions. But when the efforts have been of a more general character, when they have consisted in addressing the people rather than in mixing with them, in preaching rather than in personal intercourse, then I believe the influence has been of a most transient and unsatisfactory kind.

And who is responsible for all this? There must be a deep responsibility somewhere: it may be concentrated in a few, or diffused over many, but it must be somewhere, for our present condition is not the result of accidental circumstances—it springs from causes clear to be seen and easy to be understood. And is it not the case, that instead of all fairly considering the question, and all trying to roll away the reproach and the sin, each man spends his labour in excusing himself, in limiting his own responsibility, in showing that he is not bound to do anything? Is it not too true, that, with a few honourable and glorious exceptions, each man unbelievingly asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" and is satisfied that it is no affair of his, if the connexion is not too obvious to be denied. Moreover, this

hardened determination of freeing self from responsibility is fearfully fostered by the separation, in popular esteem, of a man's personal goodness and the manner in which he fulfils the higher duties of his station, so that little or no evil is discerned in those to whom God has committed ten talents, though every talent lies buried in the earth, because they do not obviously violate the requirements of the Decalogue; whilst few, indeed, seem to consider whether they are adequately employing for His service the gifts of influence or of property which God has committed to their stewardship.

Ask then the owners of the land, whose barren fields the crowded dwellings of the poor have converted into perennial sources of wealth, if they are not responsible? if it is not their duty to show personal sympathy to the poor dwellers upon their property, to do something to alleviate their sufferings or misfortunes, to see that some provision is made for the education of their children, and for their training for a better world? and they will, for the most part, scornfully excuse themselves, and refer to the middlemen,* whom, for their own convenience and profit, they have called into existence. Speak to these men of the sympathy they should show, and the efforts they should make for their poorer brethren, and they will tell how that the superiors under whom they hold absorb all that is worth having, whilst they are compelled to exact the uttermost farthing, for that themselves are poor and need it. Appeal to the employers of labour, and, with some honourable exceptions, they will excuse themselves by telling of what they do in the wealthy suburb where they live, and where they must give to be seen of their neighbours, but where they know nothing of the poor who are about them; whilst others will plead their position as units in a large company, as such they feel no responsibility, and so they do nothing, and therefore the poor are left to perish from want or from ignorance, whilst those who eat the fruit of their labour contentedly live on, unmindful of the wrath which they

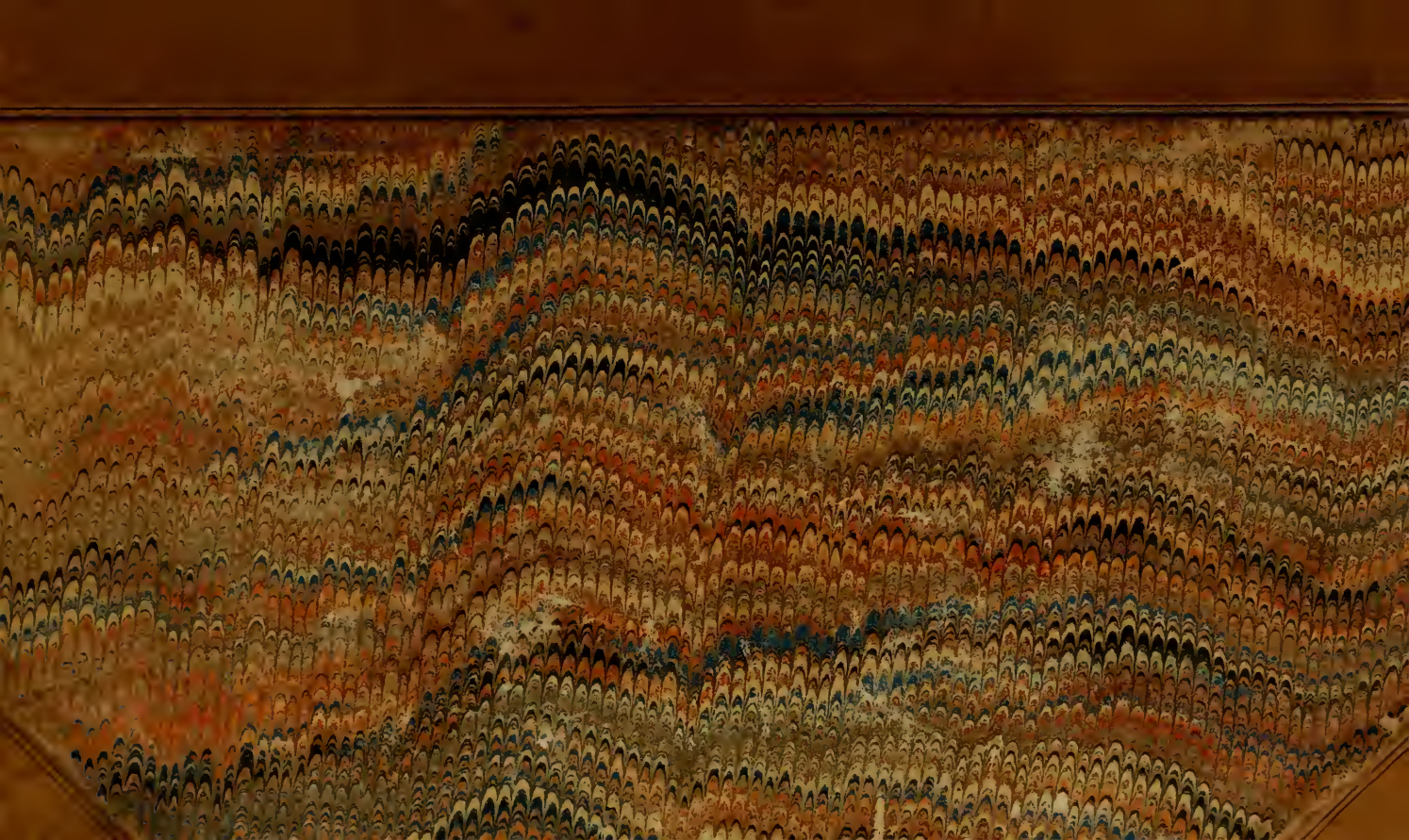
* Scarcely any cottage property in London is in the hands of the freeholder; there is a system of leasing and sub-leasing universally prevalent, which is very prejudicial to the interests of the poor.

are treasuring up against the day of wrath; whilst others, again, contrive to remove themselves by a step from all direct intercourse with those who toil for them, and reject all claims upon their consideration, because they deal in the gross with an employer, instead of in detail with the employed.

And so it comes to pass that our only hope must be in each man's learning to feel personally responsible, as a member of the Body of Christ, for whatever evil there is about him, which he has not done all that he could to diminish or to root up. This is the only manner in which Christ's work can be really accomplished, for it appeals to a sympathy which is from above, not in any way to a selfishness which is from beneath; its influence is wholly derived from a loving recognition of what is due to the Divine Head, not from better feeling, too inert to move of itself, but pushed into action by a calculation of what will best advance its own interests, or by dread of failing to satisfy the requirements of popular opinion.

And as this canker of isolation of classes, and denial or over-refined measuring out of personal responsibility, is eating out the heart of religion, and is thwarting the hopes and the efforts of those who are labouring in the cause of Christ, whither shall we look for help in combating such false notions, but to this and the sister University, where so many of the noblest and most influential in the land are trained? The remedy for this so great evil must come from above, not from beneath; it must descend from class to class; it must proceed from those who are placed over their fellows by rank or by wealth setting an example; for if they will discharge all the duties of their station and condescend to men of low estate, if they will do what they can to shame others into a full performance of their several responsibilities, if they will do whatever they are able to roll away the disgrace which now hangs over us through all "seeking their own, and not the things which are Jesus Christ's,"*—through each man being content with gazing on the mass of evil and suffering, and then passing by on the other side,—then might we hope that God's blessing would be extended

* Philip. ii. 21.

to us, that His promises would be fulfilled in ever-widening measure, until the Lord had risen upon us, and His glory had been seen amongst us. But where shall we look for men qualified for such a task? for men willing and able to work for this social, moral, and religious reform, if our ancient Universities fail us? for it is not the stone of political reform we require, but the bread of social and personal improvement. As yet, it must be confessed that darkness covers the land, and gross darkness the people. We long for a fuller and a clearer manifestation of the glory of our risen Lord, for some portion of the bright visions of the Prophet to be fulfilled in our time, for our hearts not to be ever craving for that by which they are never to be gladdened. And as it is impossible for one member to suffer without the other members suffering with it—impossible for one portion of the Church to be in this perishing condition, whilst the other parts continue healthy and vigorous, I have brought this subject before you this morning, that you may more clearly know something of the danger by which we are threatened. For such a danger is the danger of us all: it can only be overcome by the earnest, vigorous, and united efforts of every member of Christ; and if, through the supineness or neglect of any, the dark cloud be suffered to grow darker and heavier, we may find that it will rapidly spread over the whole sky, until the Sun of Righteousness is altogether hidden from our eyes, until our glory as a Church and as a nation is altogether darkened; and then, instead of our rejoicing over the knowledge of the Lord covering the land as the waters cover the sea, we shall have to mourn that our teachers are removed into a corner, and that our candle has been put out.

London:—Printed by G Barclay, Castle St. Leicester Sq.